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U.S. Public Broadcasting Body Bears Watching

With the appointments of Dr. James Killian of M.I.T., and Dr. Milton Eisenhower of Johns Hopkins, President Johnson has made a good start toward establishing the board of directors that will control the new "Corporation for Public Broadcasting." If the remaining 13 appointments are at this level of competence, perhaps some of the apprehensions that are held by conservatives will begin to drift away.

Yet it may be useful, simply for the record, to express some profound regrets at the creation of this new entity of the federal government. The CPB represents a fateful first step toward federal involvement in the shaping of public ideas and attitudes through a mass communication medium.

Nothing of this sort has happened before. To be sure, the government maintains a prodigious publishing operation through the Government Printing Office. Federal agencies put out propaganda calculated to promote everything from the fluoridation of water supplies to the building of farm ponds. Federal employees

at every level, because they are mortal men, are forever making speeches advocating certain ideas. A number of grant-in-aid programs, notably in the arts and humanities, and in public education, help to shape the public taste.

Yet none of these existing programs has the potential capacity of the CPB. What conservatives fear (and liberals ought to fear the prospect equally) is that the corporation will slip slowly and imperceptibly into experiments in federal thought control—not next year, or the year after, but some time in the future. The strong surmise is that the actual operating heads of this corporation, as distinguished from the prestigious board of directors, will be men of lively ideas. They scarcely could be otherwise. And men who hold lively ideas inevitably want to sell them. The day will come.

The corporation is created under Title II of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. In fairness, it should be said that the sponsors of the act sought earnestly to write safeguards into their bill. In making grants for the production of

TV programs, the CPB is to pursue a policy of "strict adherence to objectivity and balance."

The corporation is specifically forbidden to "engage in editorializing." The CPB is not to operate its own network, or even to own a single station; its material is simply to be offered to local ETV stations for them to use or not as they please. For the first year, grants are limited to \$9 million—surely a modest sum when compared to television production costs.

Are these safeguards sufficient? It is exceedingly doubtful. The truth of the matter is that even with the greatest dedication to objectivity and balance, it is almost impossible to avoid some forms of editorializing. A decision to film a particular documentary inevitably involves a decision not to film something else. A decision to leave this footage in, but to cut that footage out, is essentially an editorial decision.

The South got a taste of this a few years ago, in the TV documentaries that dealt with desegregation of the schools.

Oh, the networks were "balanced," all right; the balanced Negro spokesmen and white spokesmen, but it was a funny thing: The Negro spokesmen invariably were sober and articulate fellows, speaking like Oxford dons, and the white spokesmen were sweating oafs, spitting tobacco and scratching at fleas.

The first \$9 million is only the beginning. The history of every other program of Federal grants should teach us that acorns grow into oaks. In time, the CPB's powers surely will be enlarged. Meanwhile, local ETV stations, already hard pressed for quality material, will be driven to steadily greater reliance upon federal offerings.

Killian and Eisenhower are good men; the other directors doubtless will be good men, too. But they will be busy men, and inevitably they will become prisoners of the operating staff. Let men of every political persuasion monitor the CPB with the vigilance of hawks. Literally and metaphorically, 1984 is not so very far away.

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